

Epiphany 3, 2018

The Volumes of Silence

For God alone my soul in silence waits. From him comes my salvation.¹

In the past few months, I have discovered why Austin calls itself the live music capital. It is amazing to me that, for example, this evening, a Sunday night, I could go from hearing Anglican choral anthems, to Bob Dylan-sounding anthems, to Canadian alternative rock, to punk rock, to honky-tonk, folk, reggae and gospel. I'm sure I will not do this, but I could.

In my musical exploration here, I have also noticed (but this is no different than any other city) the varying decibel levels of each musical genre. For some I am a proud proponent and wearer of earplugs. Until recently, I have sported a very stylish bright yellow pair that were purchased by my family in bulk more than ten years ago for things like snow blowing and motorcycles, activities where one's ears are thoroughly covered. These yellow beauties *are* successful at plugging the ears. They make everything quieter along with a sense that everything around is muffled except my coughing or swallowing. They have done their job just fine, *but* I have recently purchased my first pair of high quality music earplugs. These new, *subtler* earplugs are designed to maximize the musical experience. One can hear the nuanced sounds and harmonies, even conversations, while eliminating the damaging effects high volumes have on the ears. A surprise I was not expecting is that when I take them out right after a concert I encounter a kind of silence that I never have had before. It is a quiet after being somewhere so loud that isn't filled with ringing or a sense of no longer being on mute, but rather just the contrast from sound everywhere directly to quiet.

For God alone my soul in silence waits. From him comes my salvation.

I have, for the purposes of this sermon, invented a theory (a spiritual theory): music is getting louder and louder as silence is also getting louder and louder, or at least how we experience silence. Just as there are different volumes in music, I imagine each one of us also knows there are different volumes to silence, to how we experience times without sound.

So often, and I share this constructively not critically, when we find ourselves met with silence, or at least when I do, part of me wants to run from it or cover it up. Whatever shape these distractions and preoccupations take for you or for me—turning on the T.V., looking at our phone, cleaning, etc.—which serve as welcome escapes when silence is *not* a place of peace and quiet, but rather where we hear our internal volume up too high for comfort. In silence we are confronted with every story we tell about ourselves and others, with judgments and guilt, worry and pain, *and* with truth. Silence shows us something about ourselves we often don't want to listen to. But as much as we try to cover it up, silence speaks to us something we cannot tune out forever.

¹ Ps 62 v.1

The truth silence speaks is not the fear, pain, or chaos we first perceive but rather the beautiful reality that we--you and me, everyone— is a child of God. For God alone our soul in silence waits. It is our own voices that are the barriers to God.

It might be nice if we could purchase some of these high-quality earplugs for our silence. That we could just put them in and hear the good only. These earplugs for silence would be nice as they would block out the damaging noise but still allow us to hear conversation, the love God communicates to us in every fiber of our being in silence. How strange that silence has become frightening when it is the very place we must go to most closely encounter God. It might be nice if we had earplugs for silence quickly moving us from the harmful noise to the beautiful peace, but it's not so quick a process and we already have all the equipment we need.

For God alone my soul in silence waits. From him comes my salvation.

I was introduced to contemplative prayer my senior year of high school and centering prayer specifically, which is one of the most widely used forms of Christian meditation around the world. Thomas Keating, a Catholic priest and the founder of centering prayer, describes silent prayer as an encounter with the Divine Therapist. It is us who carry around all sorts of heavy and swirling thoughts and emotions. In silent prayer the aim is to turn everything over—surrender it—to God whose love is greater than any harmful thought, emotion or experience no matter how powerful they may seem. The technique of centering prayer is to choose one word as an anchor. This word differs from person to person but it serves to return us to God. Venturing into silence is a journey. It can seem scary to enter silence when we fear that the greatness of love is only for others--when we find, rather than love, just a lot of failure, or worry, or noise, or nothing at all. These unloving voices can seem awfully powerful, but they are, in the end, just thoughts or feelings that serve as invitations to call on this word, to invite the God of love to walk alongside us as we move from fear to calm, to curiosity to love. There is no aspect of our past or future for which the God our soul waits for in silence finds unforgivable. It is a journey and each time we visit silence, even if we cannot tell, we strengthen the “muscle” that returns our hearts and minds to our true home, to where we find salvation in God.

For God alone my soul in silence waits. From him comes my salvation.

There are many different volume levels of silence but if, figuratively, silence were measured in decibels, it would not read zero. It is not just a void. But we pray, we trust, and we come before God in faith listening because there are good sounds—the music of silence is a gift when it sings of love, peace, delight, joy, freedom—and at as loud a volume as they will go—no earplugs needed to quiet that silence!

May we hear the good, the beautiful sounds of silence, those that sing our salvation and not fear venturing into the truth that each one of us, including you and me, are the beloved of God. For this is the silence we await. This is the silence we want to hear.

